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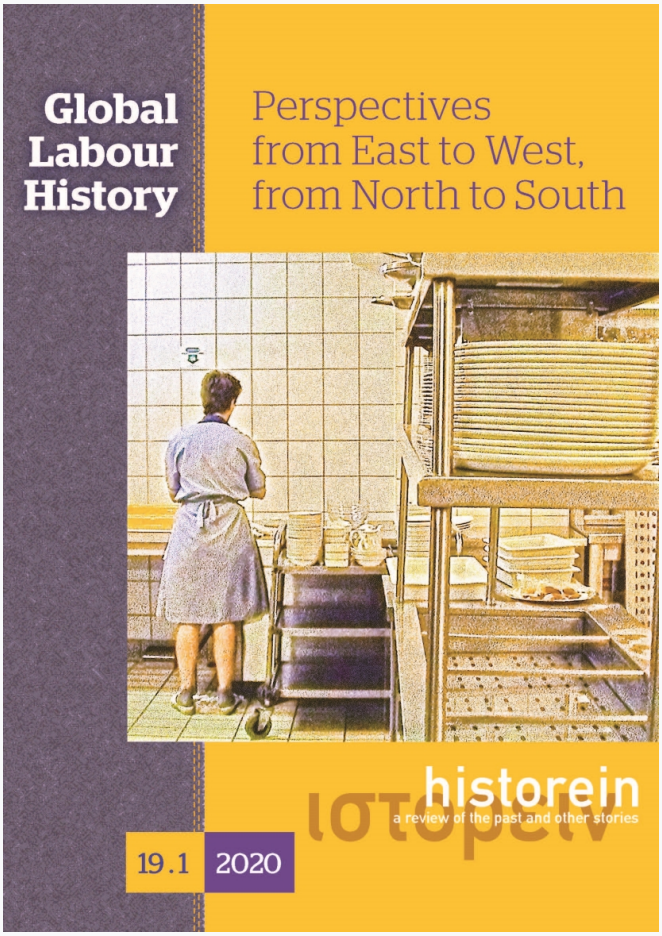

Mitsos Bilalis, Το παρελθόν στο δίκτυο: Εικόνα, τεχνολογία και ιστορική κουλτούρα στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα (1994–2005) [Online pasts: image, technology and historical culture in contemporary Greece, 1994–2005]

Anna-Maria Sichani

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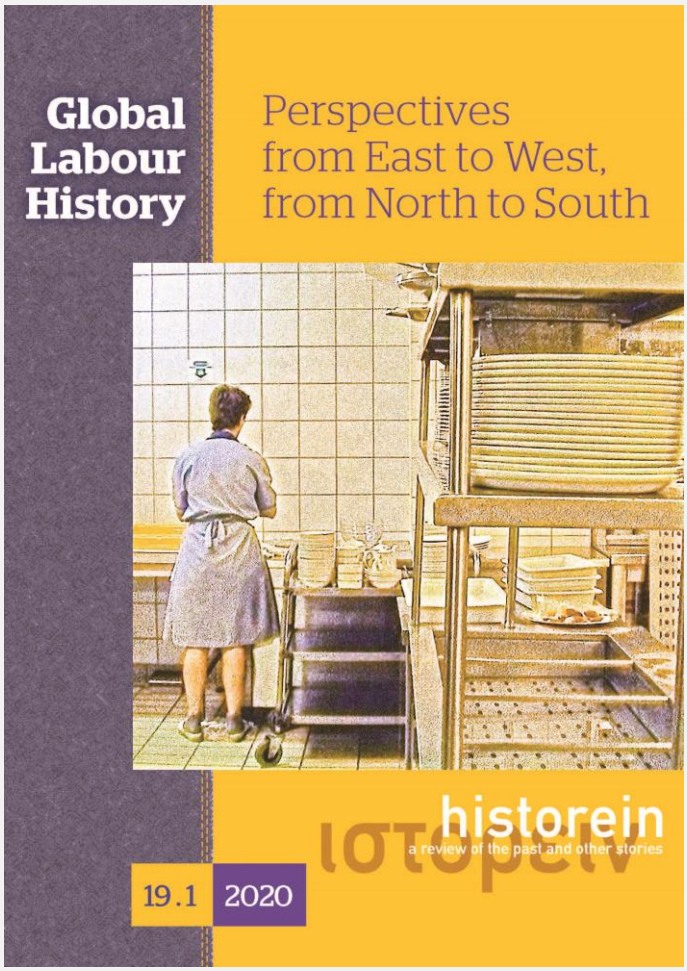

Mitsos Bilalis *Το παρελθόν στο δίκτυο: Εικόνα, τεχνολογία και ιστορική κουλτούρα στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα (1994–2005)* [Online pasts: image, technology and historical culture in contemporary Greece, 1994–2005]

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Mitsos Bilalis

Το παρελθόν στο δίκτυο: Εικόνα, τεχνολογία και ιστορική κουλτούρα στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα (1994–2005)

[Online pasts: image, technology and historical culture in contemporary Greece, 1994–2005]

Athens: Historein/National Documentation Centre, 2015. 182 pp.

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Mitsos Bilalis' e-book[1] explores how Greek personal websites dating from 1994 to 2005 employed narrative structures and mechanisms of interpreting the historical past, reflecting interesting shifts in the historical culture of contemporary Greece.

At the intersection of web historiography, internet studies and historical culture, this book epitomises Bilalis' long research interest in the theory and history of technology and, more specifically, on the web as a historical subject and its implications on historiographical thought. Surprisingly enough, the book has somehow escaped the attention of the Greek research community, possibly partly because Greek humanities researchers are either too focused on digitised historical records or still approaching web archives as a resource of historical study with a methodological aporia. Furthermore, as the book inaugurates a Greek open access publishing initiative for monographs, placing itself outside the mainstream publishing agenda, it also highlights a set of new challenges for Greek scholarly communication in terms of publicity, marketing, impact factors, citation mechanisms, price-value standards, access and copyright.

However, Bilalis' book can be successfully placed within the ever-growing international field of web history and historiography, where web archives are considered as a valuable and valid – although still untapped – source for late twentieth- and twenty-first-century history. Niels Brügger, a pioneer in the field, proposes to view web historiography as a continuation of two research fields with an affinity to digital humanities, digital history and internet studies, in bringing together the use of born-digital sources and digital analytical tools. "On the one hand, web historiography continues the historiographical approach of digital history which is almost absent within internet studies, and, on the other, it continues internet studies' interest for the web as an object of study and an important

source, which is absent within digital history".[2] Even if the World Wide Web has been with us for almost 30 years now, it's only from the mid-2000s that scholars started to reflect on the web of the past, primarily from a purely technological interest. As the web grows, the historical field dedicated to web history has expanded as well, giving rise to an important body of literature on the historical, theoretical and methodological challenges of the scholarly use of the archived web as well as on empirical studies of web archives, as well as prominent web archiving initiatives and infrastructures,[3] specialised conferences,[4] celebrated edited volumes,[5] special issues[6] and, recently, a dedicated scholarly journal.[7]

Online Pasts not only introduces the area of web historiography to the Greek research community but also further enriches the analytical repertoire of the field. As explained in the introduction, the book is grounded on a central research hypothesis: the complex trajectories of historical culture in modern Greece can be empirically traced in the multifaceted discourses, forms and practices of everyday (re)production of historical information in our mediated world. By adopting an interdisciplinary methodological approach, Bilalis focuses on exploring how early Greek personal webpages manifest a destabilisation of modern Greek historical culture, thus mapping a deeper social change in the conceptualisation of historical time from 1995 to 2004. Given the ongoing lack of empirical facts, as well as of web archiving initiatives for the Greek web domain, Bilalis has created a personal archive containing 2,500 personal webpages of the early days of the web (1994–2005) as the primary source for his research. In order to frame his sample, he describes the demographic profile of the webpage owners, briefly explains his web archiving and citation practices, and further argues for the historical and scholarly value of this already dead digital technology.

The first chapter explores how traces of the historical past appear as visual events in the screens of the personal webpages through a complex set of "metaplasias" (*μεταπλάσεις*). Visual technologies and, more specifically, technological settings for the "repetitive visual reproduction" (*επαναπροώθηση*) of past events gradually evolved and radically changed the conceptualisation of historical time during the last half of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, these visual reproduction mechanisms have a central role on the personal websites, and Bilalis further observes, through well-explained examples of specific webpages, three distinct practices of reproduction: the "unfolding" (*αναδίπλωση*), the "rerun" (*επαναπροβολή*) and the "redesign" (*ανασχεδιασμός*). Another metaplasia of historical culture is what Bilalis terms as the "presentism of the historical trace" (*ενεστωτοποίηση του παρελθοντικού ίχνους*): by creatively employing a set of compressing time techniques, the majority of the personal websites give the sense of an always-present past, of a timeless time, in line with the modern digital trends of constant updating, live tracking and streaming. Above all, Bilalis says the personal webpages are defined by the "image-text" (*εικονο-κείμενο*), a hybrid amalgam of various sensorial codes (visual, haptic,

acoustic, written, kinetic, etc.). The image-texts, distant descendants of the postwar visual economy, are available in the banality databank of the Greek web for perpetual reuse and remixing, forming, thus, a fragmented sense of the historical past. All these visual mechanisms, Bilalis argues, succeed in further blurring the borders between and the succession from past–present–future, that is, the temporalities of historical time.

The second chapter focuses on a set of new mechanics and structures of feeling of historical time (*επαναχρονισμοί*) as found in Greek personal webpages. In order to approach these structures, Bilalis introduces a quantitative factor, the "expressiveness indicator" (*δείκτης εκφραστικότητας*), as a way to measure the richness and the extent of expressive media (that is, combinations of textual, visual and graphic elements) in a personal webpage – the algorithm behind the factor is available in the appendix. Webpages appearing higher up on the scale of expressiveness actively use the technique of "osculating pasts" (*συνεφαπτόμενα παρελθόντα*), where the arbitrary linking of the national, regional and personal past results in a form of nostalgia without memory, fed by a constantly recycled and available past. A rather common trope of nostalgia involves roaming the material ruins of the past: as the material traces of the past constantly flow in the screens of personal webpages, what emerges in-between the visual representations of the ruins is not a unity of historical time but rather a (virtual) subjectivity in the making. Lastly, through the "affective production of the past" (*θυμική παραγωγή του παρελθόντος*), Bilalis' traces mechanisms where multimedia formats enable the past, present and future to be simultaneously present, a state not far from a virtual reality condition.

The third chapter aims to synthesise the new "grammar" of these online pasts. Empirical, qualitative and quantitative facts reveal that the image predominates the Greek early web: alongside the analytical approaches of the previous chapters on new metaplasia and the structure mechanics of historical time, Bilalis further enriches his argument by demonstrating that the majority of the Greek personal webpages are characterised also by a high degree of the "visuality indicator" (*δείκτης οπτικότητας*), a quantitative way to measure the presence of visual forms within their narrative repertoire. That said, he suggests the "image-movement" (*εικόνα–κίνηση*) is the building block of the online pasts in Greek personal webpages: open-ended, truly networked narrative attempts about the past, defined by the fragility and instability of visual structures and the blurred connections among persons, events and time structures within a highly mediated world.

There is, of course, a lot more one can observe in this well-written book beyond its innovative research subject. This is a volume of web historiography containing multiple – almost hidden – analogue histories. Behind Bilalis' persistence in tracing the genealogy of concepts, practices and procedures in the history of digital technology, one can identify a firm opposition to techno-determinist approaches celebrating (digital) media and technologies as either black boxes or disruptive technological events. Furthermore, this is a truly interdisciplinary book, in the sense that it brings together different epistemological traditions (web historiography, internet studies, theory of historiography, anthropology,

cultural studies), different methodological approaches (theoretico-critical, empirical, quantitative) and even different terminology repertoires from biology, mathematics, mechanics and cinema studies. In that vein, Bilalis builds bridges between his work and the work of other prominent historians and theorists (from Ong, Foucault, Massumi, Lunenfeld and Boym to Laliotou, Hamilakis and Liakos).

All in all, *Online Pasts* offers web historiography with its first book-length Greek reference. What one would expect from such an attempt, though, is a more complex historico-critical reflection on how the technical aspects of Web 1.0 technology (such as web hosting, the development aspect, technical features, functionalities) enable this type of narrative structure. In this line, comments on the technical and methodological aspects of this individual-level web archiving practice (the screenshots of the Excel database in the appendix unfortunately are not quite telling), the software used and the preservation formats would be more than welcome.

Bringing archived web material in focus is much more than an idiosyncratic, nostalgic research trend today: as the web is becoming not only the inevitable communication condition but also the main record for our current era, the primary sources for contemporary history (correspondence, diaries, newspapers, government records) are solely born-digital. But unlike the physical media, the web is extremely ephemeral and fragile. The risk of a "digital dark age", where the born-digital historical record would be lost or obsolete for future generations and historians, as technologies evolve and data decays, is what forces, among others, web archiving initiatives at the national and international level to constantly evolve in terms of standards, technology and methods; hopefully, an initiative to archive the Greek web domain will be soon part of the national agenda. Bilalis' book further insists on undertaking web historiographical reflections as to methodology and theory: as future historians will probably be a web researcher, they will need, alongside new skills and methodologies, to develop and work with new concepts and practices related to the experience, documentation and interpretation of historical time and to update their repertoire and understanding of historical culture. *Online Pasts* offers a great exercise towards this end.

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[1] Available online at https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.5.

[2] Niels Brügger, "When the Present Web is Later the Past: Web Historiography, Digital History, and Internet Studies," *Historical Social Research* 37, no. 4 (2012): 107.

[3] Such as the Internet Archive, the Danish Netarkivet, UK Web Archive and the Research Infrastructure for the Study of Archived Web Materials (RESAW).

[4] Examples include Web Archives as Scholarly Sources, Aarhus, 2015, and The Web that was, Amsterdam, 2019.

[5] Niels Brügger and Ralph Schroeder, eds., *The Web as History: Using Web Archives to Understand the Past and the Present*, London: UCL Press, 2017.

[6] "The Web's first 25 Years," special issue, *New Media & Society* 18, no. 7 (2016).

[7] *Internet Histories: Digital Technology, Culture and Society* (2017–).